SALMON, THE LIFEGIVING GIFT ESSAY BY JAY MILLER

INTRODUCTION

Salmon were at the center of life for native peoples living along the Asian and American shores of the north Pacific Ocean. Like a miracle, these five different kinds of fish return to the same streams where they first spawned. They begin and end their lives in fresh water, but they spend most of their lives in the salty sea. Not every species returns every year, since each kind has its own cycles. Every salmon has many different names, depending on local usage and stages in its life cycle. The most common names, however, are chinook (also spring, king), coho (also silver), pink (also humpy, humpback), dog (also chum), and sockeye, which spawns in lakes.

While Atlantic salmon return to spawn repeatedly, Pacific salmon spawn and die, nourishing the meager local soils along with bears, birds, and people living along rivers. Humans developed a complex set of gear and nets to take full advantage of these runs. Traps, fences, baskets, spears, and lures were all used to take fish. Over the winter, however, high water and bad weather usually wiped out all the traps and catchments so they had to be rebuild every spring. The first fish caught was celebrated with a great ceremony of welcome and thanks. (See also: "A Further Analysis of the First Salmon Ceremony".)



William We-ah-lup smoking salmon

Men and women shared the work of preparing salmon for winter food. Men took the fish from the water and women, helped by children, sliced, hung, dried, and smoked this flesh. Sometimes pounded in flour, sometime left as flanks, these dried fish kept everyone fed.

When treaties were signed in the 1850s between the US government and tribes of the Northwest and Plateau, the right to continue taking salmon was written in. (See also: "Rights of Puget Sound Indians to Fish and Game".) The US wanted to save money by

having native people feed themselves, while the native people did not want to turn into crop farmers or stoop laborers.

For over a hundred years, however, American settlement and sprawling construction have destroyed or polluted salmon habitats, killing these fish and extinguishing whole runs. The development of canned salmon made fishing profitable for the world market, but massive overfishing with devices such as fish wheels led to dwindling supplies that soon brought natives and other commercial fishers into court. Judges upheld the treaty right, allowing natives back into the fishery, but ignorance and bitterness still lurk.

For natives, salmon are a gift that comes to them every year to keep them alive. Similarly, everyone along the coast once ate great whales that were hunted by special men, as among Makahs, or that died and drifted onto beaches. They were truly gifts from the sea.

What stands out clearly from native sources is how much people identified with these underwater beings. Epics told what it was like to be a salmon, where they came from, what they did, and how they live among themselves, looking at home very much like humans. To provide a few of these viewpoints, we will meet a modern day elder, and recount two legends about salmon, one for the interior drained by the Columbia River and one for the coast of Washington.

THE SALMON PRIEST OF THE SKAGIT RIVER

Vi Hilbert is an elder of the Upper Skagit tribe. Her people hid out in their homeland for over a hundred years until the US agreed to set up a tiny reservation for them in 1974. Throughout her life, Mrs. Hilbert had worked long and hard to preserve a record of the language and traditions of her own people and the larger group of Coast Salish they belong to, called Lushootseed.

Recently, checking through old records, she found more details about how her own grandfather served as the priest for the salmon fishery along the upper stretches of the Skagit River. Since people now buy gas to run about in motor boats and purchase their nylon fish nets instead of making them from plant fibers, these accounts provide a glimpse of what life was like over a hundred years ago. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the man (sometimes woman) in charge of the fishery was more like a priest than like a manager because the basic attitude toward salmon among all natives was reverence and thanks, not gain for money.

Every spring, when the chinook began to run, two or three fish were caught and cooked in the longhouse of her grandfather. Like Communion, everyone would come there to eat a bit of these fish to give thanks for their return and to show that their remains would be well treated by everyone.

These first fish were taken in a special net that was suspended between two canoes drifting on the river. When a salmon entered the net, a man in the bow pulled up the net with the

fish wrapped inside. Then he took a long thin bone blade, split and shaped from a deer leg bone. He cut the backbone just behind the head to quickly kill the salmon and placed it in the bottom of the canoe. The net was put back into the water to catch more fish. When they had several, they took them to shore for the women to prepare for eating, drying, or smoking. Everyone put in long, hard days during the fish runs, but everyone had a good time being with others and helping out.

FISH SPEAR

Further down the Washington coast, at Chehalis, Mary Heck and her son Peter told the story of Fish Spear in 1927 to a young woman studying at Columbia University named Thelma Adamson. Peter late became a Bishop of the Indian Shaker Church and a policeman.

A brother and a sister lived by themselves. The boy was named Spear. His sister would go out to dig for fern roots to feed them both. That is the only food that they ate together. But Spear also had his own fishtrap that he kept secret. During their meals together, he ate salmon eggs that were carefully hidden on his wrist. He kept his hand over his mouth so he looked like he was being modest, but he was being greedy. He ate the salmon he caught all by himself. He only brought the cooked eggs to eat with the fern roots.

Trying to think the best of her brother, the sister kept wondering what he was doing behind his hand. When she could not longer stand to trust him, she decided to leave their home and marry an important man, the chief of the Silverside Salmon who lived where earth and sky join. She did not tell her brother. She just left.

That night Spear came home. There was no fire. There was no food. He wondered where his sister was. He followed her track to the river and went in. But soon he turned back, drenched. He went home to wait. He realized she must have left to get married. He took time to dry and smoke salmon for his trek and then he followed her. He was gone a long time.

At the horizon, he saw a large plank-sided house and he went inside. There was his sister and she had a baby. They greeted each other and then fell silent. After a time, an old man got up and went outside. He bellowed, "Come Elk" five times. Spear looked out to see a huge elk walk up to the old man and drop dead at his feet. The old man carefully butchered and skinned it so that the legs and head were left on the hide. Then he stood these up, and the elk ran off, alive and well. The entire elk torso was cooked, placed in a trough platter, and served to Spear, who ate all the meat. World's End, the sister of his own sister's husband, came in with five tiny berry baskets and gave him the smallest, but he was never able to eat all the huckleberries inside this inexhaustible container. He was content.

That night everyone waited anxiously at dark until a howl came from the river. Yells got closer and closer. Then the door burst open and Salmon who lived in this house came inside. They were dancing and waving bits of fish gear. One had a straight roasting stick, others had a forked roasting stick, broken spears, broken cords, or chipped points. They

went around the house five times. All these people were Black Salmon. After they were settled, another howl was heard and the Silverside Salmon danced inside. Then, in turn, came the Dog, Spring, and Steelhead Salmons. What seemed to be broken fishing gear were their treasures, their property and wealth gained from going to the earth. They regarded these artifacts as gifts from humans.

These five species of Salmon were the children of the old man and shared his house. After everyone was settled and quiet, they went to sleep. The next day, they were gone before dawn. When Spear woke up, World's End cooked his own sister's son, his own nephew Silverside, for his breakfast, then the old man revived the boy from the bones. On the fifth day of this, however, Spear left a bit of meat on the cheek and the boy died permanently.

Angry and in grief, his sister told Spear to leave, so he returned home through the air instead of along the water. His adventures took him through the sky world. Along the way, inside a big house, he fell in love with a daughter of Thunder and married her. After five days, Thunder tried to teach Spear to use wings and act fierce, but he failed and fled. At another winter house, he briefly married a Pitch woman. Elsewhere, an old man warned him to seek refuge in a dead white fir when attacked by another old man who owned the trail he was traveling. Spear killed and burned up that elder so no one could ever own a trail again. He crossed a river by walking over a fishtrap and married a Giant woman. He killed her father and another person fighting over their fishtraps and decreed that these traps be set far apart in the future so all could share from the closest one.

He restored the sight of a middle-aged woman, who warned him how to kill an old man Cougar with a murderous long tail. He burned the body but modern cougars came from the ashes. In another house, an old woman warned Spear that people were gathering in a prairie to kill him but he changed them into a cluster of wild rhubarb plants. Finally, he looked down and saw his own house. He came down and went inside to find that his own sister had returned home. Instead, of settling there again, however, he decided to become a May flowering plant that children could use as a toy spear. His sister also transformed into something useful, but people disagree on what she became.

COYOTE SPREADS SALMON ALONG THE COLUMBIA RIVER

For the interior of Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia, Coyote's adventures did much to make the world as it is today. One of his greatest feats was freeing the salmon from their original owners.

Five sisters lived at the mouth of the river. They are well because they had their own trap full of a wonderful fish called salmon. In those days, these were the only salmon in the world.

Every meal time, one of the sisters went down to the trap and selected a fish. Grabbing it by the gills, she hauled it out of the water, clubbed it over the head, and carried it up to the fire where the other sisters were cooking. They ate all of the foods that grew around them.

Since they were women, they were skilled at digging up roots, picking berries, and plucking fresh green shoots. When they are all of these plants, salmon was their meat. Most often, all of these foods were served together in a stew.

Whenever they were eating, however, they were most careful to save all of the fish bones. At the end of dinner, these bones were taken back to the trap and placed into the water so that salmon would reappear, alive and well. If any of the bones were missing, then that salmon was crippled in that part and the sisters looked all over until the missing piece was found and that salmon made whole.

These sisters looked and acted like women, but they were really more like shorebirds, living along the bank between land and water. During these ancient days, animals, spirits, humans, and other people shifted between outer forms. They looked more like humans, but they acted and felt more like the animal, plant, place, or thing that they became when the world changed into the way it is today.

Just as modern shorebirds wander along looking for food, so did these sisters. Every morning they scattered to pick, pluck, and pull up plants. In the fall, they went upland to gather berries. Their lodge was full of food, and their trap was teeming with salmon. They were very content, and well fed. But they got plenty of exercise, so they were lean and trim.

During these early days of the world, there were not many people, and most of them were women. One of the few men, or man-like beings, of this time was a person called Coyote, who was not just one thing. He was a mix-up of many feelings, actions, intentions, and desires. Mostly he was desires, and few of them were good ones. Whenever people hear any mention of Coyote, they know that they will be learning about what not to do, how not to behave, and, certainly, who not to be like. Coyote was mostly a bad example. But because he thought for himself at a time when everything was unsettled and in flux, he managed to stand out from that time onward.

Coyote was always getting in trouble because he would hear about things and then rush off in search of them without taking the time or effort to grasp any dangers that might be involved. He was greedy, selfish, stupid, and very, very wise, sometimes. He also had help, when he called on them. These were his little sisters who lived inside his belly and came out when he was desperate or confused. Then they would tell him what to do, he would ignore them, and he would say that he knew all along what to do and then would do exactly what they had already told him to do.

And so it was that a rumor reached Coyote that he could not resist. It mentioned beautiful women and tasty food. Trying not to show his excitement, Coyote asked where this combination could be found. "At the mouth of the big river," he was told. And so he went. He had been warned that these women would not share what they had. While we know today that it is bad not to share, in those days almost everyone was selfish with whatever they had. It was one of Coyote's greatest gifts that he made everything available to everyone, that he enabled people to share.

As Coyote got near to the sister's lodge, he could feel unwelcome. He slowed, and then stopped to consider. He was baffled. He called upon his little sisters and he squatted down. Soon they were there, and he asked them what to do. They delayed giving an answer because they already knew that their advice would not be credited. While they paused, Coyote began to mumble loudly about calling the rain to pound down and wash away his little sisters. Finally, they relented and said that Coyote would have to take on some disguise. They told him to look innocent, defenseless, and weak. They told him to become a baby. They told him to appeal to the maternal instincts of the women.

Coyote sniffed and told his little sisters to get back inside. Then he pondered aloud what he would do. He would have to appeal to the women and he would have to look harmless. He decided to be a baby, as if this was a new idea out of the blue. The little sisters inside only sighed.

Coyote changed himself into a baby. In those days, just as today, native babies are carried around laced up into supports with wooden backs and high arching tops. Such a cradleboard protects the baby. In the case of Coyote, it also floated him down the river. He had the body of a baby, but the mind of a schemer. He floated down the river, and began to whimper. But none of the women paid attention. As he got nearer to the fishtrap, he began to wail. He cried just like a very unhappy baby. But no one responded because the sisters were away gathering foods.

Coyote floated and thought. He did not want to waste energy unless he could get attention. After a time, the oldest sister came near the trap and Coyote sensed that it was time to act. He cried out, turning bright red. The woman came close, and her heart went out to the baby. She waded in and rescued the mite. She felt all warm inside. She took the baby home, changed him, and again laced up the cradleboard in time for her other sisters to return. She showed them this cute and happy infant. Most of the sisters welcomed him, but the youngest looked into his eyes and stepped back. She said, "Those are not the eyes of a baby, they are the eyes of someone devious like Coyote. Do we know where he is? At some time he will surely come for out salmon. We had best take care. Maybe it is some monster that will kill us all." But the other sisters called her hard hearted and cooed over their new child. They took turns holding him. Coyote snuggled up to their breasts.

But then one of the women noticed that their baby had teeth. He did not seem old enough to have teeth. They had planned to feed him salmon broth, but they decided to try bits of cooked fish instead. He ate slowly. His eyes got big like he enjoyed the salmon, he even gurgled with pleasure. The women were delighted. They left him in the cradleboard and went to sleep. Coyote debated whether or not to join them, but he decided that getting to eat a whole salmon by himself was worth the wait. But the next morning, he would begin his efforts to free the salmon.

After a cold breakfast, the women changed and cleaned the baby. They left him rocking in the breeze high in a tree and went off to gather food. As soon as they were out of sight, Coyote debated whether to nap or to start working. He napped. At noon, the women

returned to check on the baby and have lunch. They found him sleeping, and took him down. By being lazy, he fooled them. After lunch, the women went back to getting food.

Then Coyote changed back into his man form. He found dense round stones and heavy sticks. He set about making five stone bowls and five prybars to use to dismantle the trap. He worked in a secluded place away from the lodge. By the end of the day, he had roughed out only one bowl.

The next day, Coyote napped all day, and the women suspected nothing. For several days, Coyote only napped. Then he decided to take action. Every morning and afternoon he worked on a bowl or a pick. When he heard his five mothers coming, he turned back into a smiling baby. After ten days, he had five bowl and five prybars. He was ready. But that night the youngest sister changed his diaper and shouted that their baby now seemed to have developed muscles. She became very suspicious, and again warned her sisters to be on guard.

The next morning, Coyote waited anxiously for the women to leave. But the youngest sister did not intend to go far. Coyote gathered up his bowls and picks. He went down to the trap and began to pry it apart. But he was working quickly and made too much noise. The younger sister heard him, yelled to her sisters, and rushed down to the trap. She saw a man that looked like Coyote destroying their trap to free their salmon. She raised her digging stick to pound on him, but he was wearing a helmet made from a stone bowl over his head. After striking many times, the stone crumbled. Each sister attacked him in turn, and each shattered one of the bowls. His picks also broke as he worked, but, finally, at the last possible moment, the trap fell apart and the salmon swam upriver. Coyote left these women and told the fish to follow him upstream.

He was very proud. Now people would know him to be a leader, not a fool. When he got hungry, he called a salmon to jump onto a beach, where he cleaned and cooked it. He put the bones back into the river and the fish became whole again.

But because he was Coyote, he did not know how to be kind and generous. At every village at the mouth of every side river, he swaggered into the center and boasted that he brought a wonderful new food. The catch was, he would determine the quality and size of the fish that would return to that river according to the beauty of the maiden that the village gave him as a wife. Another story explains how salmon came to die, drift downriver, and return from the sea as his wife Mourning Dove sobs along the shore.

The respectable village at Chelan sent him away, but discovered that a waterfall suddenly blocked off their river. Some places tried to compromise and received moderate fish. Kettle Falls, however, far upriver, found a lovely wife for him and so welcomed huge salmon every year until concrete dams blocked off the Columbia River. People hope and pray, even now, that Coyote will return and bust up these dams as he once did the only fish trap to contain salmon at the beginning of the world.

Today, salmon are in danger of extinction, but natives still tell these stories and celebrate their return in rituals and songs addressed to their spirit. Once, in ancient times, the larger order of things was regulated by the arrival and use of the salmon. The Quileute, whose language is unique, found only on the Washington coast, explain why traps were never again built at their river mouth. Selfish men had kept a trap there, preventing salmon from going upstream. People would come down and destroy the trap, but it was always rebuilt. Finally, a sorcerer made a large salmon out of obnoxious creatures. Its stripes were snakes, its eggs were lizards, its liver was frogs, its eyes were toads, its fat was shark oil, and its heart was salamanders. When the greedy men caught, cooked, and ate this salmon, they died in agony. Their wives, however, were spared since they were out digging roots.

Thus, when times were bad and people were awful, only a greater evil could set things right. Most importantly, people learned a lesson from this and never again blocked the upward run of salmon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Miller, Ph.D., studied at the University of New Mexico, Rutgers, and Princeton, and has researched throughout native North America, particularly among New Mexican Pueblos, Oklahoma Delawares, British Columbia Tsimshians, Washington State Salishans, Nevada Numic, Oklahoma Creeks (Mvskogee), Oklahoma Caddo, Ontario Ojibwa, and Wisconsin Menomini. He has taught at both universities and tribal colleges in the US and western Canada, and is the author of over fifty scholarly articles, a dozen encyclopedia entries, twenty book chapters, ten edited collections, and eight books.